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US tightening access to information

First of three articles

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The Reagan Administration, while denying it is pursuing any formal policy, has moved systematically over the last three years to restrict or cut off access to a wide range of traditionally public information.

The restrictions, unprecedented in peacetime, cover material ranging from unclassified scientific papers to information about the operation of government agencies to the writings of senior officials.

As a result, a growing number of bureaucrats, scientists, historians, journalists, government contractors, unions and public interest groups are running into newly erected barriers to gathering and disseminating information.

The Administration justifies many of its specific actions on national security grounds. It claims that the nation's security depends on stemming leaks of classified information and cutting down on the flow of technological and scientific information to the Soviet Union.

But many people affected by the new restrictions charge the Administration's actions threaten academic freedom, violate constitutional guarantees of free speech and freedom from self-incrimination and create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among scholars, scientists and bureaucrats.

Some fear that ultimately the Administration's restrictions on information may impair the ability of society to engage in informed, timely debate about critical public policy questions.

Virtually all the restrictions have been accomplished by the executive branch — the White House, the Justice Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Council — without the approval of Congress. They include:

- Imposing lifetime censorship and the threat of random lie detector tests on about 130,000 bureaucrats and government contractors;

- Rewriting the rules governing classification of documents to permit more information to be kept secret;

- Permitting agencies to avoid scrutiny by obstructing the flow of previously available information under the Freedom of Information Act;

- Attempting, on at least nine occasions, to suppress publication or presentation of unclassified scientific papers;

- Requesting university officials to conduct covert surveillance of foreign visitors and to limit their activities.

No White House or cabinet-level official has responded to charges that the Administration is pursuing a conscious policy of secrecy.

Several members of Congress, in fact, have criticized the Administration for not providing such high-level policy makers as former National Security Adviser William Clark or Attorney General William French Smith to discuss Reagan's information policies.

White House officials, including presidential adviser Edwin Meese III and White House communications director David Gergen, declined repeated requests for interviews on the subject. White House counsel Fred Fielding and National Security Director Robert MacFarlane did not return telephone calls.

Through spokesmen in the Justice Dept. and other agencies, the Administration has generally defended its actions on the ground that it needs to stop leaks of classified information. Defense and intelligence officials also cite a need to clamp down on the flow of militarily valuable technology to the Soviet Union.

The restrictions on the Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA), officials claim, are needed to counter a perception among foreign governments and informants in criminal investigations that the government cannot protect confidential information.

But opponents charge the Administration has produced no evidence that disclosures under FOIA or leaks of sensitive information by bureaucrats have endangered the national security or compromised criminal investigations.

On four occasions, congressmen have scheduled closed meetings with one such official to see evidence of threats to national security being used to justify some of the Administration's actions. To date, the meetings have not taken place — either because of scheduling problems or disputes over ground rules.

"One of the most distressing aspects of these information restrictions is the failure of the Reagan Administration to offer a credible justification for the new policies," said Congressional critic Rep. Glenn English (D-Okla.)

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